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The Therapy of Humiliation: Towards an Ethics of Humility in the works of J.M. Coetzee

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Ajitpaul Singh Mangat entitled "The Therapy of Humiliation: Towards an Ethics of Humility in the works of J.M. Coetzee." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Allen Dunn, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Urmila Seshagiri, Amy Elias

Accepted for the Council:
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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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The Therapy of Humiliation:
Towards an Ethics of Humility in the works of J.M. Coetzee

A Thesis Presented for the
The Master of Arts
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Ajitpaul Singh Mangat
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Darshan Kaur Mangat, without whose dedication, guidance, support, strength and love nothing would be possible.

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ABSTRACT

This work asks how and for whom humiliation can be therapeutic. J. M. Coetzee, in his works *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace*, does not simply critique the mentality of Empire, an "Enlightenment" or colonialist mode of knowing that knows no bounds to *reason*, but offers an alternative through the Magistrate, Michael K and David Lurie, all of whom are brutally shamed and "abjected". Each character, I propose, experiences a Lacanian "therapy of humiliation" resulting in a subversion of their egos, which they come to understand as antagonistic, a site of misrecognition. In doing so, these characters confront limitation, whether by means of a Lacanian "death drive" or the abjection of the self. I argue, this subversion of their egos necessitates a return to the humility of the body resulting in a new ethical openness to others and an engagement with the world through "care" or "love" or "beauty" which manifests as careful negotiation and attentiveness. Confrontation with death, thus, allows the Magistrate, Michael K and David Lurie to slough off "Enlightenment" values in favor of an anti-humanist way of living.

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INTRODUCTION

J.M. Coetzee as Anti-Romantic

J. M. Coetzee's fiction largely refuses definition. His work refuses the assertions of literary critics to pigeonhole it within the confines of genre or a national tradition. In *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, David Attwell, the foremost critic on Coetzee's fiction, writes that Coetzee "draws on the European heritage – in particular, on novelists of high modernism and early postmodernism" (4). In this vein, Coetzee has cited authors in the modernist and post-modernist tradition as influences: Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Ford Madox Ford, and Maria Rilke. While Coetzee is open with respect to his efforts to continue this tradition, his relationship to his homeland South Africa and South African literature has been far tenser. In his "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech", he described the literature of his homeland as "a literature in bondage". Coetzee through his literature seeks to move beyond a specific political situation or temporality or historicity that confines most literature. Coetzee's works seek to move beyond or outside of the compass of national-racial signification. As such, South Africa as a locale is largely absent in Coetzee's novels. Most obviously, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is set in an unnamed, non-specific Empire that refuses to be fixed to any particular locality. Notably, this 1980 novel, which was written during one of the bleakest moments in the history of South Africa, resists the imperative to national allegory. Even when South Africa as a locale is present, in novels such as *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace*, it is often displaced by "extranational locales, […] postmodern

narration, and striking displacement of apartheid and its aftermath to fictionalized analyses of global evil and global terror" (Cooppan 201).

This displacement has brought Coetzee under intense criticism from fellow South African novelists and critics. Attwell suggest that he is not very popular in South Africa: "I don't think the majority of South Africans know who he is" (Carroll). Meanwhile, Tim du Plessis, the editor of *Rapport*, a national South African Sunday newspaper, posits that Coetzee's representations of the violence of South Africa's recent past are unfair. Specifically he argues that the gang rape of Lucy Lurie in *Disgrace* paints an unfairly negative portrait of post-apartheid South Africa: "The novel was not politically correct […] Some thought South Africa didn't need a renowned author sending out a negative message about the country at that time" (Riding). However, such criticism misses the point of Coetzee's fiction; namely, that he is attempting to move past national signification: "A fundamental theme in Coetzee's novels involves the values and conduct resulting from South Africa's apartheid system, which, in his view, could arise anywhere" (Riding). In fact, Coetzee's fiction strives to move outside of history all together. In "The Novel Today", a lecture delivered by Coetzee, he protested "the colonization of the novel by the discourse of history" embracing alternatively a narrative that does not record historical truth. Here, the ethical nature of Coetzee's response to South Africa's apartheid history becomes clear: in attempting not to follow history by representing the apartheid state's atrocities, Coetzee seeks to interrupt that history. So overwhelming is the violence of apartheid that there is, as Coetzee once put it, "too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful" ("Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech"). As such, Coetzee has chosen not have his art reduced to a simple supplement of history.

Rather than fixing his characters into a specific historicity, Coetzee seeks instead to relate the human condition. For Coetzee, much like his modernist and postmodern influences Kafka and Beckett, the human condition is defined by lack. This lack is most evident in the sex relations in Coetzee's novels. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* begins, with respect to the protagonist David Lurie, as such, "[f]or a man of his age, fifty-two, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well" (1). David thinks he has solved this problem by forming a relationship with Soraya, a tall, slim and dark prostitute, who, for the past year, he has met every Thursday. This apparent solution becomes problematized quite quickly. First and foremost, she is many years his junior, making David technically "old enough to be her father" (1). These Oedipal overtones take on an ominous tone when David remembers the last chorus of *Oedipus*: "Call no man happy until he is dead" (2). Furthermore, David remarks less than enthusiastically on their physical intimacy: "Were he to choose a totem, it would be the snake. Intercourse between Soraya and himself must be, he imagines rather like the copulation of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, dry, even at its hottest" (2-3). Thus, David has far from solved the problem of sex. In fact, sex presents itself as a problem throughout the novel. First, with respect to David, who describes himself as a "servant of Eros", a bondage that David callously employs as a defense after raping his student Melanie Isaacs; David says, during his hearing before the university, that he acted on the "rights of desire" (52). Then, later, when his daughter Lucy is gangraped on her own farm, an act that leaves her pregnant. As such, Coetzee seems to posit that there is no relation between the sexes. This thematic thread runs throughout his novels, particularly *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in which the Magistrate seems, much like David, to have solved the problem of sex through relations with prostitutes only to have these relations complicated by the barbarian girl, who

causes him to question and spurn his own desire, and *Life & Times of Michael K*, in which Michael K admits, at first, to not having women friends before, at the end of the novel, having sex unwillingly with a prostitute.

This notion put forward by Coetzee that there is no relation between the sexes runs counter to fiction centered on the "marriage plot". The marriage plot is a narrative that focuses almost exclusively on the courtship rituals between a man and a woman that finds fruition through the overcoming of obstacles blocking their eventual nuptials. Such fiction was particularly popular and prevalent during the Victorian period with authors such as Jane Austen and George Eliot. One of the most famous examples is Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. In this novel, the marriage plot centers on the protagonist Elizabeth Bennet, and Mr. (Fitzwilliam) Darcy. The impediments or obstacles to romantic happiness that keep Elizabeth and Darcy from marrying are, in fact, Elizabeth's own hasty, harsh and mistaken judgments. Elizabeth's initial prejudice causes her to think of Darcy as overly proud and overly conscious of his social status. Additionally, society poses obstacles to this courtship, including Lady Catherine's attempt to control Darcy and George Wickham's act of deceit. However, after having his marriage proposal rejected by Elizabeth, Darcy becomes a more sympathetic character, as his humility and the nobility of his character become more apparent. Eventually, Elizabeth realizes the error of her ways, and marries Darcy. In this act, Elizabeth and Darcy are both transformed because of one another, and despite their environment and surroundings. In this way, Austen posits not only that there is relation between the sexes, but also that love allows one to overcome even the most difficult of environmental complications.

Coetzee's novels trouble any conception of a "marriage plot", as not only does love not exist, but also the environmental circumstances are overwhelmingly bleak and violent. In fact, Coetzean characters are constantly faced with the threat of humiliation. The *OED* defines humiliation as the "action of humiliating or condition of being humiliated; humbling, abasement". Humiliation can further mean "to lose one's respect for oneself, to have one's pride injured by an agent that is external to oneself. Humiliation is a condition imposed on the human being, a condition that at once humbles and shames. It brings with it a feeling that one is no longer in control" (Nashef 1). Humiliation runs throughout Coetzee's novels, becoming the main focus of many of these works. In this thesis, I focus on the primary factor that contributes to the humiliation of the Coetzean character: language, or more specifically the loss of language. I examine three of his novels, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace*, focusing on how the torture that the Magistrate endures, how David Lurie's failed desire to understand and relate to his daughter's rape, and how Michael K's inability to express himself all emphasize a poverty of language, as each character is stripped of his voice. Such a state is humiliating, in that, each is humbled and shamed by the fact they can no longer control their environment through language.

A central feature of the humiliation that the Coetzean character endures is a stripping down to the bare minimum, past language, where only the body, the corporeal remains. In this way, these characters are stripped past what it means to be human, becoming animals, beasts. The humiliation and shame these characters experience results in a stripping away of their dignity, agency and being, enacting a struggle to live as humans rather than animals. At first, this struggle seems like a losing proposition, as these characters teeter on the edge of becoming animal. The Magistrate, as he endures the humiliation and shame of torture at the

hands of the Empire, remarks: "I guzzle my food like a dog. A beastial life is turning me into a beast" (87). Michael K, meanwhile, resents how Empire attempts to turn him into an animal: "They want to hear about all the cages I have lived in, as if I were a budgie or a white mouse or a monkey" (181). Furthermore, his response to Empire is to turn into a beast, as he imagines burrowing "like a mole or an earthworm" into the earth (182). As an advocate of animal rights, Coetzee aspires to a society in which human beings can "have dignity that sets them apart from animals and consequently protects them from being treated like animals" (*Giving Offense* 14). However, in Coetzee's novels, "[t]o be humiliated as a beast, to become animal, is to occupy the position that some humans have allocated to animals, an inferior position that some humans have allocated to animals, an inferior position, inviting maltreatment" (Nashef 2). As such, to become an animal is not to be treated with dignity but rather to be treated like a thing that deserves shaming, humiliation and torture.

In answering the question, what it means to be human, Coetzee's fiction posits that human existence is marked by deprivation, a deprivation that leads to a paucity of language and the threat of becoming animal. Furthermore, this reduction past language and past even what it means to be human brings about shame and humiliation. In this way, Coetzee's characters confront limitations. They are humiliated when they confront the limits of their understanding: the Magistrate by the marked barbarian girl, Michael K by his sexual confrontation with the prostitute, and David by his inability to relate to Lucy after her rape. Crucially, the humiliation of confronting limitation does lead to positive effects on the characters. These effects are subtle: they takes place over time, they result from something done to them and something that they do, and it affects their psyche – emotionally, intellectually, etc. – which we see in moments of insight that gradually coalesce into a new

moral outlook that shifts their moral compass. Ultimately, while these transformations are difficult to describe because they involve both a self-loss and a self-transformation that are closely related, they, ultimately, as I will show, manifest as an ethos of carefulness and attentiveness with respect to these characters' relationship to the world.

In order to explicate my argument concerning limitations and transformations, I draw on 20th-century continental philosophy, namely the work of Martin Heidegger and the work of psychoanalytic thinkers, such as Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. Heidegger's notion of *Da-sein* helps to explain how the limits that mortality sets on beings can lead to a more authentic mode of living predicated on *care*, while Lacan's notion of *Das ding*, or "the Thing", likewise, helps to explain how a nondestructive relation to a point beyond language, all possible meaning giving, in other words, death, can allow for a mode of living predicated on *beauty*. Kristeva's work on the notion of *abjection*, meanwhile, explicates the ways in which an individual can distance himself from a past symbolic system in favor of a new less corrupt language, or manner of communication.

I also want to point out that in making this argument, I diverge from the work of Hania A.M. Nasheef, in his book *The Politics of Humiliation in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee*, who also analysis Coetzee's fiction through the under-researched and largely unwritten on paradigm of humiliation. But, while Nashef grants that humiliation can lead to some "small successes", he generally finds that the humiliation these characters undergo is overwhelming (6). That is, for Nashef, humiliation "can never be shed […lost] in a purgatorial state, the Coetzean character can choose neither life nor death […] they remain paralyzed, unable to move" (6).

I, by contrast, argue in this thesis that humiliation is therapeutic for these characters. While humiliation is rarely therapeutic, as evidenced with respect to other Coetzean characters, and while I am not advocating employing humiliation as a form of therapy, for these three characters, the Magistrate, Michael K and David Lurie, humiliation acts therapeutically. For the Magistrate and David, humiliation allows them to distance themselves from a language complicit with Empire and caught in an outmoded form of language based in colonialism, respectively. For Michael, meanwhile, humiliation allows him to speak, to finally gain a voice. In this way, then, through these characters, a hope opens up in the bleak Coetzean world. While these characters may suffer and the future may seem bleak they still press on towards the unknown, confronting their limitations and transforming themselves for the better in the process.

CHAPTER ONE

Dying to Care: Reading with Carefulness and Attentiveness in *Waiting for the Barbarians*

"What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of the Empire!" laments the Magistrate, the narrator-protagonist of J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (146). This 1980 novel, which brought Coetzee to the world's attention, and remains, along with *Disgrace*, his most prominent work, takes seriously the possibility of living a life that seems impossible, a life nestled uncomfortably but authentically between a rock and a hard-place, between the problematic ethos of Empire and an unattainable return to the bliss of childhood ignorance, animal impulses, even, an inorganic state. In this way, Coetzee attempts to wrench this nostalgia *for* into a living *in* – a present given time, during a particular historical moment, within an unnamed Empire. The Magistrate reveals the difficulties of such an existence in his caustic response, "Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe […] One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era" (146). This emphatic epiphany lays bare the Magistrate's obscure reality, his ethereal existence. Alienation, above all, characterizes life in Empire. It reduces reality to matters of fact that Empire writes with a "submerged mind". In this way, Empire's "created" time ossifies into impenetrable, inaccessible documents of history. The Magistrate dreams of "swimming with even, untiring

strokes through the medium of time" (157), but his immediate milieu, his corporeal reality belies such a vision; the Magistrate can only swim through "a medium more inert than water" (157), the parched documents of historical time, and, as such, is left "wading […through] the ooze" (146). This disembodying of the mind of the observer from the world which he wades through, gazes at and lives in makes possible Empire's very legacy, it's prolonged, unending era.

In its desire not to end, to prolong, Empire reproduces itself. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, this reproduction manifests itself in the Empire's interrogation experts, namely Colonel Joll. Coetzee immediately places the reader into the Empire's labyrinth of dreamy myopia in the opening lines of the novel: "I have never seen anything like it: two discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them" (1). Confusion reigns over the aging Magistrate's confrontation with the Empire, which we are told he has "not seen […] since […he] was a young man" (2). Joll is as abstract as the Empire that he represents. From the form and function of his glasses to his very gaze and appearance, Joll in all his opaqueness is, as Debra A. Castillo writes, an "emblem of the estrangement of knowledge and law, of law and justice" of the Empire (79). Joll also espouses the arrogance and certainty distinctive of the Empire. When the Magistrate questions Joll's ability to garner "truth" through torture, Joll answers, "A certain tone enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth. Training and experience teach us to recognize that tone" (5). Joll's "us" marks the privileged Empire from the "they" to which the Magistrate belongs. Crucially, no "we" or commonality mediates this divide. The Empire fails to instill a sense of shared identity in its subjects. Becoming a

member of Empire's "us" should be an enticing proposition, but in this case Empire fails to coerce such a group identity. Joll, acting as the conscience of the Empire, possesses *singular* access to this tone because he has been trained to exert the correct pressure, the correct intensity of pain. As such, if "[p]ain is truth", as the Magistrate concludes, then, "truth" belongs to the likes of Joll, the privileged members of the Empire (5).

These abstractions and perverse certainties act to engender unrest in the Empire, which, according to the Magistrate, "dooms itself to live in history and plot against history" (146). In its effort to write history, to favor general over specific, universal over particular, stasis over change, the Empire relegates history to a mere record. These records instead of promoting inclusive feelings of allegiance and comradeship promote nightmarish thoughts of rebellion and death. Admitting that "[n]o one truly believes […] that the world of tranquil certainties we were born into is about to be extinguished" (157), the Magistrate's thoughts drift to the Empire's violent annihilation. This looming extinction takes the spectral form of the barbarians, who, the Magistrate predicts, after "each [subject of the Empire meets] his own most fitting end […] will wipe their backsides on the town archives" (157). Here, an opposition between colonizer, the Empire and its interrogation experts, and the colonized, the barbarians, becomes clear, an opposition between "us" and "them". The assertions of power made by Joll and the interrogation experts act to intensify, not feelings of allegiance and comradeship, but rather a sense of vulnerability on the part of the Magistrate, who, while acting as a functionary of the Empire, begins to question this role. The Empire, thus, engenders the "waiting" of the novel's title. In this waiting we see the perfect example of the stalemate produced by Empire, which dreams of how not to die, rather than how to live.

Coetzee's portrayal of Empire critiques a particular mentality. Such a mentality is manifested in the institutions and ways of life of the Empire that last and live on, providing hope to Empire's dream of eternal order[1]. Empire, for Coetzee, posits an eternal perspective. If time is a river, then, Empire situates itself in an eye in the sky or God's eye perspective that – from the shore – can see up and down the river of time. As such, Empire looks beyond the dirt in the ground, the ebb and flow of the ooze, the present historical moment, even time itself. Such a worldview or eternal perspective, what might be called "knowledge", "truth", or "reason", becomes stable across time. Coetzee's critique of Empire bares particular resemblance to the critique Martin Heidegger levies against the conventional worldview of Western metaphysics. One form of Western metaphysics is commonly referred to as the "Enlightenment", a loose characterization of those metaphysical perspectives that flowered and flourished during the 17th-century. Along these lines, Coetzee's critique of Empire can best be understood as a critique of the legacy of Western metaphysics, specifically an Enlightenment-based rationalism that exalts the universality of "reason" only to sustain white male European supremacy. "Reason", that is, as a tool of control, oppression, domination and humiliation. Dominic Head supports such a reading, arguing that Coetzee's omission of the definite article widens the connotations of the portentously termed "Empire", "which becomes available as an emblem of imperialism through history" (72). Ultimately, then, Coetzee, on the one hand, indicts the colonial system founded on a "reason" that knows no bounds and, on the other hand, examines the way in which this perspective deforms and deadens the human psyche, constituting a break between the subject and the world. Coetzee does not simply scorn Enlightenment and colonial values but

[1] These institutions are more concretely attacked in Coetzee's novel *Life & Times of Michael K*, which I discuss in the second chapter.

usefully puts something in their place. In this chapter, I propose that, through his depiction of the Magistrate, Coetzee reveals how sloughing off Enlightenment values can reveal a way of living constituted by an ethics of carefulness and attentiveness that the Magistrate acquires during his moral transformation.

Coetzee, in his essay "Into the Dark Chamber", describes *Waiting for the Barbarians* as "about the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience" (13). The novel takes place in an undefined place and time. At the novel's beginning, we find the Magistrate habitually performing his duties in an outpost of the Empire. The arrival of Colonel Joll disrupts the peace of the Magistrate's once "quiet life in quiet times" (8). Joll arrives to investigate the possibility of an uprising by the barbarians, who are believed to be preparing for an attack against the Empire. The Magistrate begins to question the purpose and validity of this investigation when Joll and his interrogation experts capture, interrogate, and torture a large group of clearly innocent fishing people and keep them as prisoners. When these practitioners leave the outpost, the Magistrate takes in a young barbarian girl left scarred and partially blinded by torture. While the Magistrate admits that he feels "no desire" (32) towards her, he cannot let her go until the marks on her "body are deciphered and understood" (33). Later, as he writes, "[t]o repair some of the damage wrought by the forays of the Third Bureau", he journeys into barbarian territory to take her back to her people (62). Upon his return to the outpost, he finds that the army has arrived in preparation for a preemptive attack against the barbarians. The Magistrate is imprisoned and tortured after being wrongly accused of treason for his transgression with the barbarian girl. He is eventually restored to his position when Joll and his men leave the outpost. The novel ends inconclusively with a battalion led by Joll sent to confront the barbarian "enemies" being

dispersed in the desert and returning without ever reaching their target, and the anticipated invasion of the Empire never taking place. *Waiting for the Barbarians*, thus, records the Magistrate's confrontation with the brutal ideals and methods of the Empire.

This confrontation is troubled by his muddling middle, even liminal position that the Magistrate occupies. He serves the Empire but his burgeoning "sympathy" for the barbarian "victims" leads him into questioning the "truths", or mode of knowing characteristic of imperial discourse and practices. Yet, despite his commiseration, he cannot simply switch sides because his position in life is not a choice to be made. The Magistrate recognizes his complicity with the Empire; he has been interpolated as a subject by the authoritative discourse of the Empire that he serves, and which, because it is external to his "being", cannot easily be discarded. Still, his sympathy with the barbarians does lead him into a quixotic act of rebellion that lands him in prison, branded as an enemy of the state. The Magistrate, by returning the barbarian girl to her people, ultimately, chooses to betray his commitments and transgress the law of the Empire.

Whether this rebellious act ultimately leads to failure or redemption has been the subject of much criticism. Critics have tended to focus their attention on the Magistrate's growing awareness of the evil imperial mindset in which he is complicit and of the difficulty of trying to break free. Many critics read this struggle as a failed awareness, the development of a false consciousness that dooms the Magistrate to complicity with the Empire. For instance, in *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*, an early critical collection on Coetzee's fiction, Teresa Dovey argues that the Magistrate progresses from "a position of 'sight', or superior vision, to a position of 'blindness'" (219). Similarly, David Atwell, perhaps the world's foremost authority on Coetzee, understands the position with which the

Magistrate concludes the narrative as "that of suspension in ignorance, of simply *not knowing*" (84). While Atwell understands this subjectivity as a somewhat positive "*positional* response" to power, he still describes the Magistrate's position as characterized by "stupidity" (86). More recently, Troy Urquhart continues this line of criticism as he interprets the Magistrate's concern for the barbarians as self-interested, "he begins to confuse justice with penance […] his desire to save the victim of Empire with his desire to save himself" (11-12) and in the end unsuccessful, "he is confined by the ideological position of Imperial Magistrate, he cannot escape it and occupy the position of the other" (13).

In this chapter, I propose an alternative reading. Coetzee paints his portrait of the Magistrate with subtle stokes that make his development difficult to grasp. He does not imbue the Magistrate's narrative with pathos; the Magistrate does not meet a tragic or heartwarming end. Neither does the Magistrate "go native"; the Magistrate can never fully share in the barbarian's history or occupy there position: "Let it at least be said […] that in this farthest outpost of the Empire of light there existed one man who in his heart was not a barbarian" (104). While it is tempting to say that the Magistrate discovers a simple negation of the Enlightenment project, such a development would lead to a no less positive position of ignorance. That is, such a reading would miss the positives, his "triumph over his [own] ignorance" (Spencer 10). The Magistrate does not simply adopt a position of unknowing, instead Coetzee shows us what a position between the extremes of knowing and unknowing might look, how such a position might be lived. I argue that, through a confrontation with abjection and death, the Magistrate experiences a "therapy of humiliation" that opens him up to a less systematic and harmonious perspective predicated on, what Martin Heidegger terms *Sorge*, or "care", which manifests as a careful and attentive reading of the world.

Although suffering is ubiquitous, the Magistrate's humiliation is special. That is, while deplorable, it is also uniquely productive, as the moments of sympathy and insight that arise from the humiliation and torture in his life coalesce into a new moral attitude of carefulness and attentiveness. By loosening his grip on his ego and reason, the Magistrate at long last opens himself to his world and his time, experience and sensation, humanity and otherness, and above all *living*.

While he questions the practices of the Empire, early in the novel, the Magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl belies his own oppositional statements and actions. The Magistrate treats the tortured bodies of Joll's victims, especially the damaged eyes and broken ankles of the barbarian girl, like texts that need to be written, read and deciphered. As he does with the white poplar slips that he excavates, the Magistrate attempts to turn the barbarian girl's body with the marks of torture impressed upon it into a sign from which he will extract the truth. His relationship with the barbarian girl does not basically deviate from the practice of Colonel Joll and the Empire's interrogation experts: "I behave in some ways like a lover – I undress her, I bathe her, I stroke her, I sleep beside her – but I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate" (46). In this way, the Magistrate inscribes himself onto her body. In another way, his attempts to translate her marked, tortured body resemble the colonizer's attitude toward the colonized: "[U]ntil the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (33). It is no coincidence, then, as suggested by Maria Boletsi, "that the novel begins with a description of Colonel Joll's sunglasses in which the narrator can see a reflection of himself" (79). Still, the Magistrate does reveal sentiments of dissatisfaction at his complicity with the Empire's mode of knowing and style of reasoning, crying out: "*No! No! No!* […I] am seducing myself, out of

vanity, into these meanings and correspondences […] How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a women's body anything but a site of joy? I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!" (47-48)

Despite his repeated efforts, the Magistrate fails in his attempts to read and decipher the barbarian girl's marked body. Her body is impenetrable and incomprehensible, as if closed off to him "without aperture, without entry" (45). The Magistrate is unsuccessful in his attempts to reconstruct her appearance from his memory: "[W]here the girls should be, there is space, a blankness" (51). She remains unknown, inscrutable, an *other*. Likewise, the barbarian girl remains an enigma with respect to the Magistrate's desire. He cannot understand why or even if he desires her at all: "[O]f this one there is nothing I can say with certainty. There is no link I can define between her womanhood and my desire. I cannot even say for sure that I desire her" (46). This lack of desire manifests itself as impotency. In fact, the Magistrate's sexual impotency is connected to the impotency of writing, a connection that works both ways. On the one hand, he finds it "appropriate that a man who does not know what to do with the woman in his bed should not know what to write" (58). On the other hand, "in the middle of the sexual act […he loses his] way like a storyteller losing the thread of his story" (45). The barbarian girl, thus, is *asymptotic*, a limit to both meaning and desire. Here, the dilemma of the novel presents itself: whether, if we understand that there can be no meaning outside the order of language, the Magistrate can somehow occupy an autonomous place in what psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls the "symbolic" dimension or order. In other words, whether he can live *in* Empire without thinking or acting *like* Empire. As we shall see, the Magistrate's evolving relationship with

the barbarian girl ultimately allows him to assert his distance from the Empire and open up such a place or position for himself.

The Magistrate's evolving relationship with the barbarian girl is best exemplified in the series of six dreams he has of her. The first dream, which occurs after Joll arrives but before he becomes conscious of her presence, foreshadows her blankness, her otherness, as the Magistrate tries "to imagine the face between the petals of her peaked hood but cannot" (10). The second dream occurs after he has taken her in, and in it the Magistrate, as he does when he sees her begging, gives her a coin, a sign of his compassion and guilt. In the third dream the Magistrate sees the girl like he has "never seen her, [as] a smiling child", as she was before she was tortured (57). The next two dreams, which occur after the Magistrate has returned, but before he is hung from the mulberry tree, represent the promise of a shift in the Magistrate's conscience. In the fourth dream he comforts her, while in the fifth dream she offers him a gift of freshly baked bread, which, according to Dick Penner, is "a gesture as suggestive of a sacrament as his washing and oiling of her feet" (83). The final dream is the most hopeful: "For an instant I have a vision of her face, the face of a child, glowing, healthy, smiling on me without alarm, before we collide […] The bump is as faint as the stroke of a moth. I am flooded with relief. 'Then I need not have been anxious after all' I think" (149). These dreams trace the Magistrate's burgeoning ethical awareness, as he forms a nondestructive relation to the barbarian girl.

The Magistrate's confrontation with limitation is most evident in his quixotic act of rebellion, his act of taking the barbarian girl back to her people. In this act, the Magistrate confronts that which is precisely nothing, most beyond this world, the absolute master – death. Castillo interprets the Magistrate's penetration of the walls of the frontier town as an

approach towards death: "despite his love [for the barbarian girl], despite his act of possession on the eve of loss, [he] does not pass the threshold of the barbarian territory (woman or mountain), he halts and does not cross that final frontier before death" (88-89). In his confrontation with a "hemorrhage of being, a loss of his image of the self" (Castillo 88), we can recognize the Magistrate as upholding a certain position, that of "not giving way on one's desire". In a Lacanian sense, he obeys the "law" of pure desire. That is, his desire aims at the Thing[2], or death, which cannot be expressed by any signifier. His behavior "is a matter here of the evocation of what is in effect of the order of the law, but which is developed in no signifying chain, in nothing" (Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 278). Therefore, the Magistrate's desire for the barbarian girl can best be understood as a "death drive". But, how so? How can we understand the Magistrate as in the grips of the "death drive", one of the most seemingly incoherent and controversial of psychoanalytic concepts?

Sigmund Freud aligns his notion of the death drive closely to biology. In a *locus classicus* from "The Economic Problem of Masochism", Freud writes: "In (multicellular) organisms the libido meets the instinct of death, or destruction, which is dominant in them and which seeks to disintegrate the cellular organism and to conduct each separate unicellular organism [composing it] into a state of inorganic stability" (163). While the libido can act to divert the death instinct or drive outwards towards objects in the external world, the goal of this drive, according to Freud, is to bring the living being back to the inorganic state. For Lacan, who adopted this notion from Freud, the death drive is not purely a biological fact. Instead, it relates to the symbolic order – that dimension of symbolization into which the human being's body must translate itself in order to speak – which strives for

[2] I will further explicate the Lacanian Thing in my analysis of Coetzee's novel *Life & Times of Michael K*, which I discuss in the second chapter.

homeostatic balance but is disrupted by an object that will not integrate into the symbolic order, in other words, the Thing. And, what, at this level, is the death drive? The death in desire as a death drive is a "second death". That is, according to Lacan, in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, "death insofar as it is regarded as the point at which the very cycles of the transformations of nature are annihilated" (248). In other words, the "second death" is the possible annihilation of the symbolic texture through which "reality" is constituted. Along these lines, Slavoj Žižek, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, interprets the "second death" as a "symbolic death": "not the death of the so-called 'real object' in its symbol, but the obliteration of the signifying network" (147). While, as Žižek admits, there is no escape from the symbolic order, the "second death" holds the radical possibility for this "real object" of occupying an autonomous place in the symbolic order.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate puts himself on the verge of the "second death", as death seems to break in on or overtake his life. Early in the novel, the Magistrate appears ready to succumb to death, describing himself as feeling "like a man who, in the grip of the undertow, gives up the fight, stops swimming, and turns his face towards the open sea and death" (22) Then, later in the novel, he admits to feeling like he has "already died one death" (138). The Magistrate makes this latter comment after he has been tortured in an episode where he is strung up on a mulberry tree and publicly humiliated. Menàn Du Plessis describes this traumatic event as a liberating moment in the Magistrate's life: "[I]n a strangely dream-like sense, this is a kind of death. After this incident the magistrate is freed and allowed to resume his old way of life. There is a persistent sense, however, that something has ended" (124). The "kind of death" that Du Plessis describes sounds very much like what Lacan defines as "second death". After all, this death breaks in or overtakes the Magistrate

after he comes into contact with the Thing, the barbarian girl, as he is imprisoned and later tortured for transgressing the law of the Empire by "treasonously consorting with *the enemy*" (85; emphasis added). By coming into contact with the Thing without losing himself or being destroyed, the Magistrate's relation to the symbolic order is paradoxically both "freed" and "ended". That is, his relation to the proper, familiar world is loosened and his own ego is subverted.

The Empire's *modus operandi* is humiliation. The Magistrate is forced to perform degrading acts for a public audience, and as such is shamed by the Empire. The Magistrate says, "It cost me agonies of shame the first time I had to come out of my den and stand naked before these idlers or jerk my body about for their amusement" (128). This public shaming is soon superseded by an even worse humiliation, a loss of knowledge. What the Magistrate is truly ashamed of is the possibility of dying an ignorant man: "What I shrink from, I believe, is the shame of dying as stupid and befuddled as I am" (103). The Empire's most effective torture is, as such, revealed to be the lack of meaning provided to the Magistrate for his sufferings. The Magistrate makes an appeal to the authority of history, screaming, "History will bear me out!" (125). However, Colonel Joll does not even allow him a place in the history of the Empire, responding, "But who is going to put you in the history books? […] There will be no history, the affair is too trivial" (125). Speechless, the Magistrate's language, place in history, even his subjectivity is robbed by the Empire.

The Magistrate is reduced past shame, past knowing, past language, even past what it means to be human. When he is strung up on a mulberry tree, the primary source of his humiliation is that he is forced to dress like a woman. In this way, the Magistrate experiences abjection. According to Julia Kristeva, "abjection of self would be the culminating form of

that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being." (5). In other words, abjection is the expression of both a division and a merging, whether between subject and body, or self and Other (object, the social). Hania A. M. Nashef, in *The Politics of Humiliation in the Novels of J. M. Coetzee*, finds that by being turned "into a woman […the Magistrate is] no longer fully human, but en route to becoming an *object*" (98; emphasis added). In turning the Magistrate into a woman, an object, the Empire makes the Magistrate aware of his body, "what it means to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well" (126). Moreover, Caroline Rooney suggests that "torture deprives the other of truth in reducing awareness to the extreme sensations of the body" (200). Thereby, the Magistrate learns that "the meaning of humanity" is not found in concepts like "justice" and "truth", which can so easily be manipulated (126).

This experience of abjection or humiliation is therapeutic for the Magistrate in that it allows him to both distance himself from Colonel Joll and his men and the inadequate imperial modes of knowing and ways of reasoning, and slough off the Enlightenment values that characterize the Empire. In this way, the Magistrate's ego, which, for Freud, is the seat of reason, can be understood as subverted or undermined. Late in the novel, he makes a concerted effort to evade the *cogito ergo sum*, René Descartes' famous Enlightenment notion: *I think therefore I am*. The Magistrate stutters around the edge of the cogito, repeating "I think" but never allowing himself to stop thinking, to assert truth, to ossify his being into an object, a thing. For Castillo, "the magistrate is forced to acknowledge […the Empire's] power, and, fascinated by the intenable perverted products of the power ploys, the magistrate himself perverts language to avoid the unsavory cogito ergo sum" (89). In fact, the Magistrate ends

this "thinking" by refusing to reason, to come to a conclusion: "I think: 'There has been something staring me in the face and still I do not see it" (170). The Magistrate experiences a Lacanian form of therapy. For Lacan, the ego is a site of *méconnaissance*, misrecognition[3], and therefore, rather than strengthened, should be subverted in therapy. But, if we understand the Magistrate as subverting his ego and reason, then, what replaces it? That is, if the Magistrate does open up an autonomous position for himself in the symbolic order, how does this position look? How does one *live* with a subverted ego?

Since there is no solution to or escape from the symbolic order, the thing to do, in the words of Žižek, is "to try to articulate a *modus vivendi* with it" (xxviii). The Magistrate's new *modus vivendi*, mode or way of living, is revealed through his relationship to the barbarian girl. Where the Magistrate once obsessively attempted to decipher her torture marks and translate her body into language, his "therapy of humiliation" has opened his self-absorbed mind to an otherness that exceeds the mode of knowing and style of reasoning characteristic of the Empire. Now, late in his narrative, the Magistrate openly admits that in the past he attempted to imperialistically mark her as his own: "Though I cringe with shame, even here and now, I must ask myself whether, when I lay head to foot with her, fondling and kissing those broken ankles, I was not in my heart of heart regretting that I could not engrave myself on her as deeply" (148). The Magistrate finally asserts his distance from Colonel Joll, by coming to live *with* difference, *with* otherness.

At the beginning of the novel, the Magistrate admits that he "stopped […his] ears" from hearing the screams of Joll's victims (9). Later, the Magistrate's budding care for others forces him to the ethical realization that "[s]omewhere, always, a child is being beaten" (88).

[3] For Lacan's work on misrecognition in ego formation, see his famous "Mirror Stage" essay, 75-81, and his seminar *Freud's Papers on Technique*, 167

This awakening, what the Magistrate describes as "a change in my moral being", is made even more real when he attempts to stop Colonel Joll from beating a group of barbarians (47). The Magistrate's newfound care and ethical awareness become evident in two important ways when compared to the scene in which he reprimands himself for attempting to make "meanings and correspondences" out of the blank, faceless other, the barbarian girl. Whereas in that scene he reprimanded himself for depraving her, in this scene he attempts to stop Joll from depraving the barbarian prisoners. For the Magistrate, Joll is depraving these prisoners in writing the word "ENEMY" on their backs. In this way, he imposes meaning onto the barbarians. That is, he depraves them, by making them out to be immoral or wicked. Then, when Joll is about to hit these men with a "four-pound hammer", the Magistrate stops him by saying "No!" (116). The same word he thought to himself when he was "depraving" the barbarian girl. In this public utterance and through his actions, we see the Magistrate reveal his novel ethical relation to others. He demonstrates a new found care, specifically, a care opposed to the Empire's self-affirming "truth" and "reason": the Magistrate does not want these men to be made into something they are not, "enemies". This care is further exemplified when the Magistrate shouts, "Look at these men! […] *Men!*" (117). Mike Marais, in *The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee*, suggests that the Magistrate attempts to "remind the torturers, and their spectators, of the humanity they share with the prisoners […making himself thereby] responsible not just for the barbarian girl but for all human beings" (31). Thus, where the Magistrate once shielded his eyes and ears from the world, he now lives *in* the world with a care that he realizes must encompass others, *all* others, *all* of humanity.

This mode of living *in* the world and burgeoning notion of *care* connects the Magistrate to what Martin Heidegger terms, in his seminal work *Being and Time*, *Da-sein*, literally, being there, *in* time. For Heidegger, Western metaphysics dulls beings, or humans, by affirming the existence of an ahistorical *substance* or *presence*. Such a belief is incorrect, according to Heidegger, because it transforms Being into a thing or an object; as such, Being needs to be recovered as a process *in* time. For a being to come to terms with Being he or she must, for Heidegger, must acknowledge his or her own mortality, as mortality sets limits on beings and therefore reminds them of their deaths. Only in acknowledging mortality, Heidegger posits, can a being affirm and actively will their own death, and live *in* time, becoming beings-toward-death. The most authentic manner by which a being can be connected to the world is, Heidegger writes at the end of Part One of *Being and Time*, through *Sorge*, or "care", that is, a concern and solicitude towards other human beings, or *Da-seins*.

The Magistrate's growing awareness of his surroundings can be understood, in a Hedieggerean sense, as the achievement of an authentic *modus vivendi*. By coming into contact with the barbarian girl, the Magistrate experiences a "second death", but rather than being destroyed, it allows him to subvert his ego through a "therapy of humiliation" and separate himself from his past imperialistic mode of knowing or "reason". Thereby, he comes to occupy a space where death breaks in on life, which allows him to actively will his own death, and ultimately become a being-towards-death, an authentic, ethical, caring being. The Magistrate's newfound care manifests in a new mode of reasoning and living in the world constituted by *care*-fulness and *attentive*-ness. Instead of reading the world as full of signs that reveal some metaphysical truth, he comes to understand that events and other beings

demand to be viewed with care and attention and therefore can even challenge or refute prevailing "truths".

This transformation is evident with respect to the Magistrate's hobby of excavation. Early in the novel, the Magistrate's mode of knowing and style of reasoning make him complicit with the Empire. For years the Magistrate has pursued a personal quest to excavate some ancient ruins that sit two miles due south of the town. Within these ruins he discovers a bag of white poplar wood, on which are painted characters in an unknown script. The Magistrate attempts to decipher these scripts in every which way: "[I] laid them out, first in one great square, then in sixteen smaller squares, then in other combinations […] I have even found myself reading the slips in a mirror, or tracing one on top of another, or conflating half of one with half of another" (17). Through this insistent and incessant deciphering, the Magistrate hopes to find "a map of the land of the barbarians in olden times, or a representation of a lost pantheon" (17), but really he awaits a "sign" (17), to feel "a special historical poignancy" (18). In other words, the Magistrate seeks an eternal perspective, that is, he hoped to discover, in the vacuousness of the desert, the truth of the past. In his digging, the Magistrate looks up and down the river of time in hopes of unearthing metaphysical truth.

Soon, an uneasy sense of complicity digs at the Magistrate's conscience. Filled with despair at his fruitless toiling, the Magistrate admits that his actions are "[v]ain, idle, [and] misguided" (18). He begins to understand that "the space […of the ruins] is merely space, no meaner or grander than the space above the shacks and tenements and temples and offices of the capital" (17). The Magistrate is left with a feeling that no matter how long and no matter how deep he excavates he will not find what he is looking for, as "[t]he sign did not

come" (17). This image of the Magistrate excavating ancient ruins without being able to find a special historical poignancy, fixed meaning, or presence evokes that prominent critic of Western Metaphysics Jacques Derrida and his famous essay "Différance". In this work, Derrida compares the Egyptian pyramid with textual meaning: a pyramid announces "the death of the tyrant" or pharaoh that it is empty inside just as language always has its own death within it since meaning is repeatedly deferred (4). In seeking this meaning but discovering in his excavation of the ruins only a lack of meaning, the Magistrate, according to Susan Van Zanten Gallagher, "seems to be wandering in the wilderness of deconstructive criticism" (279). Understating the Magistrate as a sort of deconstructionist or poststructuralist critic – a role we can see through his growing awareness of the slipperiness of the signifier – reveals that the novel "treats knowledge and reason with the utmost suspicion" (Marais 31).

Eventually, the Magistrate's sense of complicity leads to a moral transformation. This transformation is evident when Colonel Joll asks him to arrange and translate the white poplar slips that he excavated from the ruins. To the "submerged" mind of Empire, these slips contain a coded message through which the Magistrate and the barbarians communicate. However, Joll's desire for verification is intentionally thwarted by the Magistrate's new careful and attentive mode of interpretation. The Magistrate invents a range of contradictory meanings, from *war* to *vengeance* to *justice*, which leave the ultimate meaning of the slips "open to interpretation" (123). That is, rather than allowing these elusive slips, which "can be read in many ways", to "form an allegory" or represent a single interpretation, the Magistrate refuses to fix them into some "truth", and thereby challenges the Empire's aim of deciphering them according to a schema that produces its own intended meanings

and beliefs (122). Robert Spencer puts it another way: "[T]he Magistrate ceases to be the author of his world and becomes its reader" (184). Through this act of defiance, the Magistrate condemns the transitoriness and violence of an Empire with which he was once complicit, but now lives *in* without thinking and acting *like*.

At the end of the novel, one year, four seasons, after it commenced, the Magistrate seems to have come full circle, resuming "the legal administration that was interrupted as year ago by the arrival of the Civil Guard" (159). But, his vision both subconscious and "real" have changed. These visions are now conflated. His subconscious dream condenses into his milieu. Snow begins to fall, as the Magistrate approaches the scene of children building a snowman that he has seen so many times in his dream. He feels "inexplicably joyful" not because the realization of his dream confirms some "truth" but rather because he does not feel the need to comprehend this scene that he once eagerly attempted to decipher (170). "Anxious not to alarm them", he notices that "the snowman will need arms too", but he does "not want to interfere" (170). If we understand this snowman with its armless and misshapen body as the other, the Magistrate's response, then, becomes an act constituted by an ethics of carefulness and attentiveness, an ethics that does not affirm similarities but rather recognizes differences. The concluding image of the novel represents this hope, the promise of a future possibility of *acting* with care and attention with respect to a world full of strange signs, a humanity comprised of mysterious others: the Magistrate "*presses* on along a road that may lead nowhere" (170; emphasis added), to a future beyond the current system of symbolization, to a life in which the "truths" of the Empire are subverted, and in doing so authentically and ethically engages his world every step of the way.

CHAPTER TWO

The Thing is The Thing is The Thing: Planting the Seeds of Resistance in *Life & Times of Michael K*

The struggle at the heart of J. M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* pits the Magistrate against his own role and complicity in Empire. The Magistrate does not commit willful evil but rather must resist his own passive acceptance of the violent and humiliating mode of knowing and style of reasoning characteristic of the Empire. As he says, "'The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves […] 'Not on others'" (160). Consequently, the moral transformation that the Magistrate undergoes manifests itself in subtle and often unrecognizable ways, as he occupies the same position at the end of the novel as he did at the beginning. The struggle at the heart of Coetzee's next novel *Life & Times of Michael K* pits Empire against that which is outside its boundaries, that which refuses to be known and understood. And, as such, this struggle caries with it a more overt threat to the structure and order of Empire, a threat pregnant with the seeds of potential resistance and revolution.

"Talk, Michael […] You see how easy it is to talk, now talk. Listen to me, listen how easy it is to fill this room with words […] Give yourself some substance man, otherwise you are going to slide through life absolutely unnoticed", says a medical officer of the Empire to Michael K, the protagonist of *Life & Times of Michael K* (140). This 1983 novel, which arrived after Coetzee's first three novels had cemented his reputation as an important writer of fiction having already earned a bevy of premier literary prizes, including the CNA Award

(1977, 1980), the Geoffrey Faber Award (1980), and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize (1980) to name a few, enacts a drama between presence and absence, what is heard and what is unheard, resistance and capitulation, even life and death. In this way, Coetzee asks what it means to be human. In the figure of Michael K this drama is played out in a life and times, a becoming, a *bildung* that is so slight, so quiet that it threatens to disappear, go "unnoticed". On the one hand, this text suggests that human beings are made visible through words. In this sense, Michael in his reticence, his poverty of language teeters on extinction. On the other hand, the novel makes another suggestion that we are always spoken *for* that in Empire our language, our story is never our own. In this sense, Michael does not have a personal voice. In the medical officer's evocation to Michael to "talk", to "fill this room with words", the question becomes: whose voice will fill that room? Does the medical officer actually want Michael to talk? Or, does he want Michael to "listen" to him, and to reproduce a particular discourse, a discourse of Empire?

Empire attempts to order the world to assert orderly difference. However, in this desire, Empire often dehumanizes. For instance, in the beginning of the novel, the authorities of Empire are not given proper names. Instead they are identified by there institutional roles: the shopkeeper, the policeman, the nurse, the soldier, and the medical officer. In this way, these people are reduced simply to their relationship to authority and power. Oppositely, the institutions of Empire are given proper, human names, *as if they are human*: Jakkalsdirf, Kenilworth, and Huis Norenius. Michael K, the protagonist, of the novel oscillates uncertainly in Empire between being human and being a faceless functionary. This uneasy relationship to authority is seen in his name: he is an individual, Michael, but also

something less, K. Even his individuality is regularly effaced, as he is often mistakenly referred to as "Michaels", in official documentation and by the medical officer.

The mentality of Empire is also made apparent in the series of institutions or camps that Michael progresses through in his narrative. The range of camps is astounding, encompassing seemingly every seed of existence, "camps for children whose parents run away, camps for people who kick and foam at the mouth, camps for people with big heads and people with little heads, camps for people with no visible means of support, camps for people chased off the land, camps for people they find living in storm-drains, camps for street girls", etc (182). The institutions of Empire, for Susan Van Zanten Gallagher, act to dehumanize by stripping their inhabitants of agency rather than educating, or improving their lives: Michael finds "systems of dehumanization at both the resettlement camp and the army rehabilitation camp. Allowed to leave the camp only as members of a work party to provide cheap labor […] the inmates are stripped of volition […] provided with (minimal) food and shelter, their lack of self-determination and privacy strips them of human dignity" (149). These institutions of Empire, by stripping people of their volition, self-determination and human dignity, enact a sort of anti-*bildung* or un-*becoming*; it is no wonder, then, that for Michael to leave these camps is an achievement, a chance at freedom, at living: "Perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time. Perhaps that is enough of an achievement, for the time being" (182).

Coetzee's critique of Empire in *Life & Times of Michael K* centers on the dehumanizing, repressive social structures and agents of these institutions or camps. One of these agents is the medical officer who tries to make Michael speak, to make him fill the room with words. For Susan Heider, the confrontation between Michael and the medical

officer makes visible the ways in which an aggressive Empire manifests in the individual, in that, the medial officer's attempts to make Michael speak are a form of repression. In this way, Heider lays bare Coetzee's radical stance, his critique of Empire: "When K does not respond, the doctor's mentality becomes that of a torturer […] The doctor's sadism attempts to force a story from K, a story which would be his victory. He frames his questioning of K in terms of torture […] while he does not use violence […] he badgers K with words, his torture-machines of meaning" (88-89). In his refusal to talk, his refusal to grant the medical doctor his "victory", Michael attempts to avoid the repressive side of Empire's structures of society, communication, history and economics. Coetzee, I argue, does not simply scorn Empire and its repressive structures but imagines a *real* alternative. In this chapter, I propose that, through his depiction of Michael K, Coetzee reveals how refusing to participate in Empire can reveal a new mode of life, a new community constituted by an ethical relationship to the dirt underneath our feet.

The eponymous hero of *Life & Times of Michael K* is marked out from birth, as a result of being born with a harelip "curled like a snail's foot, the left nostril gaped" (3). His deformity leaves him with a distorted speech, and he appears to be mentally handicapped, as his mind "was not quick" (4). These defects leave him socially isolated, with no friends, women or otherwise. At the beginning of the novel he is employed as a gardener. His sick old mother, Anna K, is a servant in Cape Town. Dying from "dropsy", she begs Michael to take her "home" to a farm in Prince Albert, Karoo, where she was born the child of laborers. Hoping to return his mother and escape the full-scale civil war in South Africa, Michael travels while pushing his mother in a wheelbarrow, but before they get very far she dies. Michael travels on alone, with the new goal of taking his mother's ashes to Prince

Albert. He finds the home abandoned, and lives there, tending pumpkin seeds, until frightened off by the arrival of an army deserter. Thereafter, he is commandeered to a forced labor camp; he returns to the farm only to be captured by the army; and, he is kept in the hospital of a "rehabilitation" camp for suspected rebels. Throughout these events, Michael keeps returning to the farm, in hopes of living in harmony with nature. It is at the hospital where he meets the medial officer, who tries to bestow charity on him, which he resists before escaping. Back in Cape Town, he encounters some pimps and prostitutes, who treat him as an object of charity. Alone at the end of the novel, Michael envisions a scene in which he helps an old man obtain water. In that way, Michael reasons, "one can live" (184). *Life & Times of Michael K*, much like *Waiting for the Barbarians*, thus, records an individual's confrontation with the brutal ideals and methods of Empire.

Unlike the protagonist of that novel, the Magistrate, Michael is never complicit in the mode of knowing and style of reasoning characteristic of Empire. The Magistrate begins his narrative excavating ruins and seeking a metaphysical truth; Michael also lives with his nose to the ground, but his nose is planted firmly in the soil, as he labors as a gardener. Through gardening, by living *with*, even *in* nature, Michael attempts to evade Empire and its institutions. In fact, Michael dreams of burrowing into the earth, away, not just from Empire, but all of society. This desire to leave mankind is evident in Michael's belief that he is not simply a gardener but an animal or insect: "I am more like an earthworm, he thought. Which is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence" (182). Here, then, we see another possibly crucial difference between the Magistrate and Michael: whereas the Magistrate ultimately rebelled against Empire, Michael seems to rebel against all of society, all of mankind. Thus, the question

becomes, whether or not in his life as a gardener, Michael can ever plant the seeds of *resistance*.

Whether this act of gardening can ultimately be understood as opposed to Empire, as rebellious, has been the subject of much criticism. Critics have tended to read Michael's gardening in one of two ways: a liberatory politics, or oppositely a politics of refusal, in the vein of Bartelby from Herman Melville's famous short story, "Bartelby, the Scrivener", in which Bartelby famously repeats, *I would prefer not to*. The critics, who read this act as a refusal, read it as the development of a failed or incomplete project that prevents Michael from fully opposing Empire. In an early review of the novel, "The Idea of Gardening: *Life and Times of Michael K* by J. M. Coetzee", Nadine Gordimer argues that Coetzee "does not believe in the possibility of blacks establishing a new regime that will do much better" (142). Along these same lines, Michael Valdez Moses does not believe that Michael, one of these "blacks", can ever take a political stand, "without a strong desire for recognition, which takes the form of the demand to have one's human dignity publicly acknowledged, K cannot take political activity very seriously" (143) For Moses, by not feeling "much care for what others think of him", Michael "is finally indifferent to social and political demands for justice" (143). More recently, in their book *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri interpret Michael as approaching "the level of naked universality: 'a human soul above and beneath classification,' being simply *homo tantum*" and therefore in the end too close to "the edge of the abyss", too "solitary", and too much "on the verge of suicide" to complete a liberatory project of resistance.

In this chapter, I propose an alternative reading. Coetzee does not depict Michael's development or transformation with overt moments of revelation that make his

development easy to grasp. He does not imbue Michael's narrative with obvious political overtones. Neither does Michael's development occur gradually throughout the novel. Rather, his development is delayed, only taking place at the very end of the novel. Therefore, while it is tempting to say that Michael does not change, and is never, in the end, able to become a figure of resistance and liberation, such a reading would miss the positives, his ultimate status as a "hero" (Coetzee 121). Michael does not simply remain an isolated, voiceless wanderer, instead Coetzee shows us what a position between the extremes of silence and interpolation in Empire might look, how such a position might be lived. I argue that, through a confrontation with shame, Michael experiences a "therapy of humiliation" that allows him to gain a *voice* predicated on keeping one's nose "to the ground", and living *with* nature. By narrating his story, Michael shows us the real possibility for a future built on personal agency and shared existence.

Throughout the novel, various people attempt to write or speak for Michael. Mike Marais, in his book *Secretary of the Invisible*, reads the story as "a series of replicated episodes, each of which brings Michael K into contact with a character that attempts to assert himself by negating K's alterity" (108). In this way, these characters attempt to make Michael known, to efface his alterity, his otherness so as to place him in a narrative that they recognize and understand. For them, Michael, marked as different and lesser from birth, appears to be from another order of life. As a subaltern, he is conceived of as other than human, as a different order of being all together. It is no surprise, then, that Michael is thought of as a threat, as someone who needs to be contained: "People in a marginal state, placeless, left out of the social patterning, become sources of danger because their status is undefinable" (Newman 129).

Michael's undefinablity is reflected in Coetzee's prose. As Gallagher points out, in Coetzee's "grammatical and syntactic construction, disembodied voices speak, hands hold out green cards, sentences repeatedly begin in Hemingwayesque fashion: 'It was'" (148). Furthermore, Coetzee's use of passive voice, an aspect of style he has written extensively about, lends to a sense of a lack of agency. This disembodied voice and lack of agency are not surprisingly characteristic of Michael in *Life & Times of Michael K*. Derek Attridge notes that "phrases like 'He thought' are frequently resorted to, conditionally reminding us that we are outside Michael K's consciousness […] this stylistic choice – together with the use of the past tense – allows Coetzee to sustain throughout the fiction the otherness of K's responses" (50), an otherness that attempts are continually being made at, by the agents in the story – the representatives of "the system" – to contain.

These agents often speak at Michael rather than to or with him. This failure in communication is best exemplified when Michael deals with the obtaining or presentation of "permits", which function as his identity to the authorities of Empire and as a means of freedom to commute. When attempting to depart from the city, Michael is asked for a permit that he clearly does not have, to which the corporal responds, "I don't care who you are, who your mother is, if you haven't got a permit you can't leave the area, finished" (23). For Hania A. M. Nasheef, "Michael K fails to understand why the authorities refuse to listen to him. Rules pinned on the door of the orphanage, unbending laws that officials refuse to explain, continuously talked at, and urged to be quiet, are the very practices that he has been brought up on and exposed to all his life. When the practice is slightly altered, he fails to respond" (30). Michael lives an alienated existence. He fails to develop any relationships with others, admitting, early in the novel, to not having women friends, and, later, running away

from the army deserter, boss Visagie's grandson, a possible friend and accomplice, when he comes to the home at Prince Albert. Crucially, this failure to form relationships manifests in Michael's day-to-day life, as he is unable to adjust to the changing conditions of life.

Michael's worsening alienation from Empire and its agents, and outside existence in general manifests as silence. This characteristic is one of his most remarkable and revealing because unlike many of Coetzee's other central characters, such as Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron* and David Lurie in *Disgrace*, who are effusive and verbose, endlessly chronicling their inner lives and the world around them, Michael does not tell his own story. In using a third-person limited point of view, Coetzee gives us access to Michael's mind but preserves Michael's silence. This characteristic is largely a reflection of his childhood. His mother, Anna K, rejected him at birth due to his harelip, kept him away from other children, and taught him that his main purpose in life was to take care of her, which resulted in him spending his childhood "learning to be quiet" (4). The absence of his father, meanwhile, also, according to Teresa Dovey, forced him to live in a world of silence: "There is no father, so K remains subjected to the mother's desire, and in, a sense, outside language, relegated to the realm of silence" (297-298).

Michael's retreat from speaking, from language is soon followed by a retreat to and into nature. In his retreat from society, Michael, for Marais, "does not simply yield himself up the land, but is actually drawn into the land, such that he soon becomes part of the land" (44). Michael imitates the land, and in the process his body and even his inner world begin to conform to the outer world, nature. Michael describes South Africa as a place of rocks rather than of foliage: "[H]e thought of an earth more vegetal than mineral, composed of last year's rotted leaves and the year's before and so on […] I have lost my love for that kind of earth,

he thought […] It is no longer the green and brown that I want but the yellow and red; not the wet but the dry; not the dark but the light; not the soft but the hard" (92-93). Crucially, at the end of the novel, Michael becomes like his conception of South Africa, a "hard little stone barely aware of its surroundings, enveloped in itself and its interior life" (185). Michael becomes the landscape.

Michael's retreat from the world also brings him precariously close to a retreat from life itself. In retreating from language and submerging himself in the environment, Michael begins to dissolve. Through a series of ever-growing states of sleep, dreaming and hallucinations, Michael begins to lose his sense of himself: "It occurred to him that he might not be fully in possession of himself" (119). Unable to give voice to this thoughts and feelings, and living in a malnourished, underfed body, Michael does begin to lose possession of his self. For Anton Leist, Michael has lost the content and meaning of his life: "[E]ven if he is not […] losing his life in the biological sense, he is losing his grip on it and with it every humanely lived life. He meshes with the earth […] Of course, eventually every human meshes with the earth, but for Michael this is strikingly visible even while he is alive" (202). Whereas, the Magistrate's thoughts often drifted to suicide, and the tortures he endured brought him precariously close to death, he always pressed on, even, during his imprisonment, even, as he says, recovering "a spirit of outrage" (110). With Michael, his grip on life always seems tenuous, as if he has already let go and is situated at the limits of living, where man becomes nature and life becomes death.

This linking of Michael's alterity to death connects him to what Lacan calls *Das ding*, or "the Thing"[4]. The Lacanian Thing appears at a point where the phenomenal world collapses: "The Ding is the element that is initially isolated by the subject in his experience of the *Nebenmensch* [or neighbor] as being by its nature, alien, *Fremde* […] *Das ding* is that which I call the beyond-of-the-signified" (Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory* 52-54). The Thing lies radically beyond what is symbolically representable. Michael embodies these same characteristics in the way he stands at the limit where the symbolic system stands on the verge of collapsing. Michael *qua* Thing thereby represents the boundary where sense and nonsense separate. That is, Michael demonstrates that desire is aimed at a point beyond all possible experience, all possible meaning giving, the beyond, *Jenseits*.

Michael refuses to be signified. He cannot be grasped, as his life has been a series of referrals. Through his silence, Michael has eluded the authoritative discourse of Empire. Its agents have "failed to grasp him in the present, or signify him through a past; he will continually exist as a deferred presence, resisting signification" (Nasheef 36). In this way, Michael is like a deconstructed sign that is continually deferred. Derrida writes that "when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. We take or give sings. We signal. The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence" (*A Derrida Reader: between the Blinds* 59). Paradoxically, then, Michael *qua* Thing can be understood as not yet born. That is, in his failure to be present, Michael has yet to be called into existence: "Always when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were

[4] Lacan's notion of "the Thing" draws on various thinkers, most notably Freud's use of the same concept, Heidegger's lecture on "the Thing" and Immanuel Kant's "Thing-in-itself", but for the purposes of my argument, I will be focusing solely on the Lacanian Thing.

eaten up, the gap remained" (150-151). Coetzee, supports this notion that Michael is still to be born, as he writes, "There is a sense in which Michael K cannot die" (464). But, what does this mean that Michael is not born? How are we to interpret this absence of life? As we shall, see Michael, though humiliation, is (re)born, by becoming aware of his body and developing a voice.

Throughout the novel, Michael lives in a state of shame or humiliation. Michael is humiliated by his physical appearance. Michael is also humiliated by his inability to speak. Additionally, Michael is humiliated by others' perception of him as a "simpleton". Still, there is one particular episode in which Michael is particularly humiliated. In one of the final episodes of the novel, Michael meets two pimps and their prostitutes. One of the pimps pressures him into drinking alcohol, wine and brandy, which cause the derelict Michael to vomit and become dizzy. Then, one of the prostitutes seduces Michael, an act that causes him to feel much shame and humiliation: "Against his will the memory returned of the casque of silver hair bent over his sex, and the grunting of the girl as she labored on him. I have become an object of charity, he thought. Everywhere I go there are people wanting to exercise their forms of charity on me. All these years, and still I carry the look of an orphan" (181). In this sexual act, Michael is made to feel like a child, like someone helpless who needs others' charity to survive. After spending the majority of the novel attempting to be self-sufficient and independent, free of society and humanity, he still has yet to gain the recognition or respect of others. This realization is as humiliating as any occurrence in Michael's life.

The effect of this humiliation is that it makes Michael aware of his body. After this event, Michael considers the physical tortures he has endured, the story of his life that he

would tell others: "I would have told a story of a life passed in prisons where I stood day after day, year after year with my forehead pressed to the wire, gazing into the distance, dreaming of experiences I would never have, and where the guards called me names and kicked my backside and sent me to scrub the floor" (181). Where Michael once tried to live outside of his body, allowing it to shrivel to bare bones, and live not simply in but *like* nature, like the plants and rocks, he now considers the pain, physical traumas and humiliations that his body has endured. It is through this acknowledgement of the body, the physical, that Michael begins to progress from a life teetering on death, a life lived for oneself, to a life lived *in* the world and *with* others. According to Moses, "[t]he simplest needs of the body and the most apolitical and solitary occupations contain the seeds of civilization, with all its burdens and sorrows" (151). In this way, the brute physical existence of the body supplies the corporeal link between Michael and civilization. Thus, while it has been argued that Michael's humiliating experience with the pimps and prostitutes causes Michael to become "the derelict so familiar to South African eyes […] the type of non-person that we are used to closing our consciences to" (Muller 13), I argue that his humiliation finally allows him to become a person with a body that he and other must be aware of, and with bonds to civilization and humanity, and, as we shall see, a *voice*.

Michael's humiliation allows him to gain a voice. How so? From his mother's death to forced labour and torture to the sex act with the prostitute, Michael has experienced a series of traumas. The effect of these traumas is a closing up of Michael's psychic life and reservoir. For Sigmund Freud, "trauma is characterized by an influx of excitations that is excessive by the standard of the subject's tolerance and capacity to master such excitations and work them out psychically" (Laplanche and Pontalis 465). One useful way of working

out these traumatic excitations is by giving voice to them. We hear the birth of such a voice, when Michael reflects, immediately after the departure of the pimps and prostitutes, on his identity: "It excited him, he found, to say, recklessly, *the truth, the truth about me. 'I am a gardener,'* he said again, aloud" (181-182). At the end of the novel, then, Michael finally realizes his *essence* that the medical officer earlier urged him to discover. That is, Michael finally talks, filling the silence with words, giving himself some substance. In this way, then, his humiliating experience with the prostitute acts therapeutically.

Crucially, Michael's voice carries important political valances. Throughout the course of the novel, Michael is drawn with little to no agency. Instead, it is the institutions of Empire that are bequeathed with agency to affect change and order the world. This dynamic changes at the precise moment Michael speaks. As if speaking to the institutions and agents of Empire, Michael says:

> They want me to open my heart and tell them the story of a life lived in cages. They want to hear about all the cages I have lived in, as if I were a budgie or a white mouse or a monkey. And if I had learned storytelling at Huis Norenius instead of potato-peeling and sums, if they had made me practice the story of my life every day, standing over me with a cane till I could perform without stumbling, I might have know how to please them. (181)

Crucially, Michael does not "please them" when he speaks. Having been taught storytelling not by Empire but rather in spite of Empire, Michael does not speak about the cages he has lived in but instead speaks about the time he spent with his nose "to the ground". In the most direct and deliberate statement made by Michael in the novel, he identifies himself as a gardener. Michael politicizes his voice and thereby himself by identifying himself as living

such a role. For Gallagher, the presentation of the gardening theme is a revision of the enduring South African myth of a return to the land, which suggests that the garden is proposed "as a millennial alternative to the cataclysm of the camps" (156). Thus, Michael's gardening is set-up as a geopolitical challenge to Empire as his discourse is linked to the colonial issue of the control of space. In his refusal to speak about cages and his refusal to cede control of nature over to Empire through his gardening, Michael becomes a political figure, a figure of potential resistance and liberation.

Michael's statement that he lives with his nose to the ground is crucial because the soil plays an important thematic role in Michael's political vision. The soil is necessary for Michael's gardening and thereby his vision for a new history. According to Gordimer, in South Africa, the death of the soil is tantamount to the end of life: "the presence of the threat not only of mutual destruction of whites and blacks in South Africa, but of killing, everywhere, by scorching, polluting, neglecting, charging with radioactivity, the dirt beneath our feet" (143). It is imperative, then, that soil be kept at the forefront of our concern. It is on the land, for Michael, that one should live, as the purest joy that Michael experiences is the taste of a pumpkin he grows from the soil. In keeping alive the possibility of gardening, Michael envisions a new history for the land of South Africa, an alternative form of freedom and peace.

An illustration of this new history emerges at the end of the novel. Michael considers how he would plant seeds in the future: "[M]y mistake was to plant all my seeds together in one patch. I should have planted them one at a time spread out over miles of veld in patches of soil no larger than my hand, and drawn a map and kept it with me so that every night I could make a tour of the sites to water them" (183). Michael's future vision is contained in a

seed. Hope, for him, is a seed. Through a seed Michael can share the bounty of the earth, and the salvation that comes from keeping the earth alive. Through the relationship of the gardener to the earth, the hope of salvation is manifested in a seed, and in these relationships we see, what Michael calls, "the moral of it all […] the moral of the whole story" (183). Kelly Hewson perhaps best explicates Michael's morality, his prophetic vision, his envisioned future: "[T]he novel points to a possibility […] that through creative, cooperative enterprise, a community can be founded. It need not posit a rural utopia, this idea of tending earth, but suggests a means of achieving some personal power, independence and interdependence against a backdrop which denies individual integrity and privacy" (68). Like the image of Michael spreading out his seeds, his vision constitutes just one possibility for a future of personal agency and healthy community. After all, the future will not be one solitary voice, not one envisioning, but a cacophony of voices, a myriad of imaginings that will plant the seeds of resistance in the minds of those once written on and spoken for by the authoritative discourse of Empire. In this multitude, Michael prophesizes, a new viable community will be formed.

Life & Times of Michael K ends with a dream vision, in which Michael returns to the country with a companion, "a little old man with a stoop", with whom he will share a bed and for whom he will obtain water from the demolished pumps with a teaspoon and a string, and thereby share the bounty of the earth. As such, far from treading on the verge of suicide, both physical and socially, by *preferring not to*, Michael plants the seeds of resistance in his imagining of a new future. Crucially, this imagining is constituted by the creation of a real alternative. After all, this alternative arises from nature, both the rich soil on the ground and the love in Michael's heart for gardening, which, he says, "is my nature" (176). As such,

Michael imagines an alternative to the repressive institutions and agents of Empire, an alternative that leads not toward the naked life of *homo tantum* but toward *homohomo*, humanity square, which will be enriched by the earth, the collective will, and, above all, love of the community.

CHAPTER THREE

Desiring Responsibly and Living

"Beautifully" in Dark Times in *Disgrace*

"I can't run my life according to whether or not you like what I do. Not any more. You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character. I am the minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor", says Lucy Lurie admonishing her father David Lurie, the protagonist of J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (198). Set in South Africa in 1997 or 1998, this 1999 novel, for which Coetzee won his second Booker prize, generated an extraordinary level of critical commentary upon its release for being the first significant diagnostic reflection from an established South African writer of the "new South Africa" – a post-1994 South Africa, a post-apartheid South Africa. Coetzee's diagnosis finds an Empire in *flux*, a nation in a state of *shock*, *trauma*, *inconsolable melancholia*. "So overwhelming still is the raw presence of the past", explains Vilishani Cooppan, "so unfinished the business of coming to terms with it, redressing it, memorializing it, and changing it" (200). Coetzee openly casts doubt on the possibility of achieving closure on a painful past, of ever finding atonement or healing, by envisioning this national moment of seeming *liberation* not as "apartheid's vaunted end but as a rupture in progressive temporality altogether" (Cooppan 209). Lucy's reproval of her father reflects this South African moment of limbo, this temporal rupturing: where there were once clear delineations between "major" and "minor" characters, such solidity has now melted into air.

Lucy recognizes the artificiality of such divisions or ordering and thereby the limitations of the *mores* – language, racial classification, authority – of Empire. Her sentiments echo the Lyotardian *post*modern skepticism of "grand narratives". In this vein, Lucy's sentiments also cast doubts on the positive, liberating hopes of these "grand narratives" for the poor, the ignorant, and the oppressed. Accordingly, she casts doubts on the emancipatory potential of the "new", *post*-apartheid South Africa.

Disgrace depicts a "new South Africa", with its altered environment, its changed attitude, its new way of doing things. Not surprisingly, the characters often speak about "these days", as if they are trying to understand and come to terms with the changes occurring around them. At the beginning of the novel, David speculates about the life of Soraya, the prostitute who he meets every Thursday at two p.m.: that she may work for the escort agency one or two afternoons a week and otherwise live a respectable life in the suburbs "would be unusual for a Muslim", he finds, "but all things are possible *these days*" (3; emphasis added). Lurie's own career as an academic has also changed with the times: "Once a professor of modern languages, he has been, since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization, adjunct professor of communications […] He has never been much of a teacher; in this transformed and, to his mind, emasculated institution of learning he is more out of place than ever" (3-4). For Derek Attridge, these changes to the varied domains of religion, sex and educational policy are implicit critiques of those in South Africa who control these policies to resist broader, global shifts in attitudes and expectations. As such, the changes to these domains add credence to notion that "the change from a racist to a democratic political system has made little difference" (Attridge 101).

Soon, the novel's representation of "the times" takes on a darker complexion. David articulates the changed South African moral landscape with an anger and sarcasm that typifies his speech: "A risk to own anything: a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes. Not enough to go around, not enough cars, shoes, cigarettes. Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation […] That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect […] Cars, shoes; women too" (98). David's assessment of contemporary, post-apartheid South Africa with its capitalistic circulation of "goods" mirrors the landscape of racist, colonial, apartheid South Africa, particularly in his final comment concerning women. This circulation of women in the new South Africa mimics the relationship of acquired land and the "procured sexual object", as the colonial ransacking of land often accompanied the acquisition of women, who were generally considered part of the booty; ravaging of the land, thereby, is akin to the ravaging of the body of the native, specifically the female (Nashef 105). According to Hania A. M. Nashef: "The relationship towards the land by the colonizer affects the way the colonized begins to view his own land. The colonized begins to internalize the colonizer's views" (106). Violence perpetrated by the colonizer begets violence perpetrated by the colonized, an imitation that manifests during decolonization. For Fanon: "Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the 'thing' which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself" (28). The violence in post-apartheid South Africa can thereby best be understood as a consequence of years of cruelty and violent oppression, constructed, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari might put it, "on the ruins of the territorial and the despotic" (333).

Coetzee's portrayal of a traumatized South Africa is an indictment of apartheid and colonialism. The residual effect of this colonialism is a state caught in a powerful breach of time, haunted by its past and unable to fully enter the future. Time, Coetzee observed in a 1984 interview, had been

> extraordinarily static […since] the party of Afrikaner Christian nationalism came to power and set about stopping or even turning back the clock […] tried to stop dead or turn around a range of developments normal (in the sense of being the norm) in colonial societies […] instituting a sluggish no-time in which an already anachronistic order of patriarchal clans and tribal despotism would be frozen in place. (209)

A major consequence of this "sluggish no-time" or breach of temporality is psychological, which Coetzee's psychosocial critique demonstrates in the ways in which colonial violence dehumanizes everyone who is exposed to it. In an early review of *Disgrace*, Jane Taylor relates Coetzee's treatment of the cycle of colonial violence in post-apartheid South Africa to the Enlightenment's legacy of the autonomy of the human subject, with each individual living consciousness alienated from other consciousness. The new South Africa, for Taylor, is characterized by a lack of ethical human relations. That is, individuals lack respect, sympathy and compassion for other human beings. While, as we have seen in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee mistrusts collectives, particularly the institutions of Empire, in *Disgrace*, Coetzee figures the ethical response to these institutions and their residual effects in the day-to-day, the individual, the psychological. For him, the moment of liberation can only be conjured by living *in* the present, *with* others. In this chapter, I propose that, through his depiction of David Lurie, Coetzee reveals how

sloughing off Enlightenment-based notions of the autonomy of the human subject can be transformative, allowing for a shift from a narcissistic outlook to an awareness of others, an openness to the world, and a valuing of otherness.

Disgrace tells the story of David Lurie, a white, fifty-two and twice-divorced professor. Once a professor of Modern Languages, specializing in the Romantic poets, he now works in the Department of Communications at Cape Technical University in Cape Town. At the beginning of the story David claims to have "solved the problem of sex rather well", through his meetings with Soraya (1). Their relationship ends when David sees Soraya with her two boys in the city, which leads to "a growing coolness [between them] as she transforms herself into just another woman and him into just another client", before eventually she stops returning him phone calls (7). Thereafter, he has three sexual encounters with his student Melanie Isaacs. Although he pleads guilty before the University committee, Lurie refuses to confess "from his heart" (54), with a "spirit of repentance" (58). As a result, he loses his job, leaving Cape Town in disgrace, and ends up living with his estranged daughter, Lucy, who is homesteading in the country, growing flowers, gardening produce, and keeping dog kennels. David tries to mend his relationship with her while working at the local animal clinic with Lucy's friend Bev Shaw. In a vicious attack, three men rape Lucy, David is beaten and burned, and the dogs are shot dead. David is certain that Petrus, Lucy's black neighbor, is behind the attack and wants to take over her land. Thereafter, David becomes absorbed in his work at the animal clinic, feeding, cleaning, treating, killing animals, and even speaking and caring for them in their final moments. Also, while at first outraged with his daughter for refusing to report the rape and abort the child she now carries, he comes to accept her choices and new life. The novel ends with David working on a chamber

opera about Romantic poet Lord Byron in Italy, and helping to kill a dog dear to him that he has come to *love*.

At the heart of this narrative are the two rapes: David's rape of Melanie, and the gang rape of Lucy, David's daughter, which begins David's descent into a state of *disgrace*. The text constructs a parallel between the two acts. Elleke Boehmer has argued that "the structural symmetries of the narrative […] align Lurie's self-styled seduction […] with the gang rape of his daughter […] White dominance *and* the overcoming of white dominance are both figured as involving the subjection of the female body, as part of a long history of female exploitation of which the narrative itself takes note" (344). Lucy figures David in this subjection, by implicating her father in the rape: "You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange—when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her—isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood—doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder?" (158). It is no surprise, then, as Ido Geiger posits, that the novel "does not at all contend with rape either in legal terms or in the terms of moral law as they are ordinarily understood […rather] what is at issue is an entirely *personal* wrong" (147; emphasis added). *Disgrace* is a *bildung*, charting the development of David's consciousness and conscience. Specifically, the narrative is driven forward by David's acceptance of Lucy's rape, both in relation to his own past misdeeds and the ways in which she lives with the effects.

Late in the novel, Lucy discusses whether she loves her unborn child: "Love will grow – one can trust Mother Nature for that. I am determined to be a good mother, David. A good mother and a good person. You should try to be a good person too" (216). To which David thinks: "A good person. Not a bad resolution to make, in dark times" (216).

Whether David becomes a "good person", whether he is transformed, has been the subject of much criticism. Critics have tended to focus their attention on David's, largely failed, attempts to sympathize and identify with Lucy in the aftermath of the assault. In *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee* a critical collection on Coetzee's fiction, Mike Marais argues that David can never "know" Lucy, as he, like her rapists, is "guilty of a similiar failure of the imagination, since he is "inspired by the position […he occupies] in history's economy of exchange" (182). For Marais, then, David fails to develop a sympathetic imagination. A.M. Nashef, who like me reads the novel through the paradigm of humiliation, contends that while David can "comprehend the pain that has been inflicted on his daughter, he can not begin to comprehend "what the rape of the female entails" (108) Finally, Angeleke Boehmer reads Lucy's passivity in the aftermath of the rape not as a redemptive otherness, but rather as simply that passivity, even from redemption, a passivity that David cannot relate to.

In this chapter, I propose an alternative reading. Coetzee, much like with the Magistrate and Michael K, paints his portrait of David Lurie with subtle stokes that make his development difficult to grasp. As with the Magistrate, who ends up in the same position at the end of his narrative as a functionary of Empire, and Michael K, who experiences the episode of humiliation with the prostitute very late in his narrative, in *Disgrace*, Coetzee similarly does not imbue David's *bildung* with an obvious arc, as he remains "open" to the end of the narrative. While it is tempting to say that this openness reflects David's unfinished development, such a reading would miss his moral growth and, his resulting new relation to the world and outlook on life: "[t]he attention to a main character that many readers find unlikeable at the very least, in his deep resistance to responsiveness and

'answerability' to others […can be read as an] act of love on Coetzee's part" (Faber 310). David does not simply maintain the same position in this new South Africa, instead Coetzee shows us how a finding an "interstitial non-position" in this society might lead to the acquisition of a new language, and how this new position might look, might be lived. I argue that, through a confrontation with abjection and death, David experiences a "therapy of humiliation" that opens him up to a less egotistical and narcissistic perspective predicated on an openness to otherness, and a new-found agency with respect to his own desire. By loosening his grip on his own ego, David at long last opens himself to others, both human and animal, and the possibility of love.

David Lurie, at the beginning of the novel, is wholly a product of a problematic language and colonial system. His complicity with an outdated and outmoded way of knowing and style of reasoning reveals itself early on with respect to David's fading career. His publishing career has failed to establish him as a leading voice in his field of Modern Languages, with an emphasis on the Romantics: "[H]e has published three books, none of which has caused a stir or even a ripple: the first on opera (*Boita and the Faust Legend: The Genesis of Mefistophele*), the second on vision as eros (*The Vision of Richard of St Victor*), the third on Wordsworth and history (*Wordsworth and the Burdens of the Past*)" (4). Furthermore, having been reassigned as a professor of communication, David ironically has a difficult time communicating and relating to his students. Whereas David writes and teaches about dead poets, his students are more concerned with contemporary literature. For instance, one of the students from his Romantics course, Melanie Isaacs, is more interested in contemporary feminist authors, such as Adrienne Rich, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker. David increasing

sense of alienation leads him to see his students as a kind of foreign race, concluding, "they might as well have been hatched from eggs yesterday" (32).

Stuck in this problematic language and colonial system, David often resorts to the failed discourse of Empire. Most obviously, at the beginning of the novel, he is working on a chamber opera based on the love life of Lord Byron. Rather than allow him to connect with the outside world, he admits that it will likely never see the light of day, concluding that its composer is "obscure and growing obscurer. A figure from the margins of history" (167). David and his opera both belong to a Western tradition that is becoming increasingly irrelevant in the new South Africa. According to Graham Pechey, Lurie strongly identifies with Romantic poets such as his subject Byron due to a shared overwhelming feeling of having been an exile in one's own country: "Like Lurie, its male representative led 'imperfect' lives and were forced out of England into more permissive climes. Lurie's identification with them develops into a sharing of their fate, an exile that is in his case is internal" (380). Here, the dilemma of the novel, a dilemma very similar to the one the Magistrate faces in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, presents itself: whether, if we understand that there can be no meaning outside the order of language, the Magistrate can somehow occupy an autonomous place in what psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls the "symbolic" dimension or order. In other words, whether he can live *in* Empire without thinking or acting *like* Empire. As we shall see, David's evolving relationship with women, particularly his daughter Lucy, ultimately allows him to assert his distance from the Empire and open up such a place or position for himself.

At the beginning of the novel, David is totally self-absorbed in his dealings with others, particularly women. Divorced twice, David has turned to seeking relationships with

women who are younger and not of the same status as him and thereby can help him to fulfill his desires and fantasies. His narcissism is evident in his relationship with Soraya. Despite the fact their relationship is based simply on a monetary transaction, David deceives himself into believing that she harbors romantic feelings for him, "at the level of temperament her affinity with him can surely hot be feigned" (3). David's fantasies are soon shattered by a chance encounter with Soraya out with her two sons. Upon learning that her life extends beyond her professional commitments to him that she does not exist to fulfill *his* desires, David loses complete interest in her. As his ex-wife, Rosalind puts it: David is "a great self-deceiver" (188).

Soon, David's desires become directed toward his student Melanie. Even younger than Soraya, she is in much the same way described as purely an object of desire: "She is small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes" (11). And, as with Soraya, Lurie's dealings with her are completely egotistical, self-motivated and self-fulfilling. He displays a complete lack of concern for her; she is simply an adjunct of his ego, someone to gratify his desires. David does not simply want to be with Melanie or make love to her but to own her and her beauty; as he explains to her, "a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone […] she has a duty to share it" (16). Thus, David justifies his pathologically narcissistic and egotistical view towards women that they are somehow his property. He goes as far, as he watches her in a play, as to claim her success as his own: "When they laugh at Melanie's lines he cannot resist a flush of pride. Mine! He would like to say to them" (191).

David's desire to own Melanie and possess her beauty reaches its darkest and most violent stage when he first has sex with her. While it is never explicitly defined as sexual

assault, the description of the event certainly colors it in this negative light. It is described as a violation: "He has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her" (24). Notably, David resists interpreting the attack as a rape: "Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck" (25). In fact, his justification of the event marks him as still complicit with a problematic language and colonial system, a Western tradition that is becoming increasingly irrelevant in the new South Africa. He tries to justify the event by convincing himself that he is "*a servant of Eros*: that is what he wants to say, but does he have the effrontery? *It was a god who acted through me*" (89). In this justification, David again resorts to a failed discourse grounded in a bygone era. Along these lines, Lucy Valerie Graham writes that this use of language "is a critique of the Romantic/humanist posturing that obscures, even justifies, forsaking ethical responsibility in the realm of life. And yet David, scholar of Romanticism, is guilty of 'attitudinising' when he excuses his violation of Melanie Isaacs as an act motivated by Eros, or inspired by 'Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves'" (441). Such a forsaking of "ethical responsibility" is supported by Farodai Rassool, one of the committee members in the university's inquiry into his conduct, who observes that David makes no mention of the pain he has caused, only allowing that he was acted upon by desire.

David's attack metaphorically kills Melanie: "He sees himself in the girl's flat, in her bedroom […] kneeling over her, peeling off her clothes, while her arms flop like the arms of a dead person" (89). But, whereas Melanie metaphorically dies, Lucy *is* death. Locked in the lavatory of Lucy's room as she is being raped, David contemplates the possibility that Lucy may be dead: "He and his daughter are not being let off lightly after all! He can burn, he can

die; and if he can die, then so can Lucy, above all Lucy" (96). This contemplation of death intertextually connects Lucy to William Wordworth's Lucy. Specifically, Coetzee's Lucy is connected to the Lucy of Wordsworth's "Strange fits of passion have I known", a poem in which the male speaker upon approaching Lucy's house, much like David, exclaims: "'O mercy!' to myself I cried, / 'If Lucy should be dead'" (27-28). Later, Lucy directly articulates to David her likeness to death: "I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life" (161). This affiliation between Coetzee's Lucy and Wordsworth's Lucy is evident, apart from the shared name, "in Lurie's scholarly interest in Wordsworth, the presentation of both Lucys as lost daughters from an uncomprehending male perspective, and their association with nature, rural existence, and the alterity of death" (Marais 184).

Lucy's relation to death – a point beyond all possible experience, all possible meaning giving, the beyond, *Jenseits* – is most evident in her rape, and the consequences of this act. "Death", after all, is in itself an attempt to name the unnamable to establish through language what is irretrievably beyond language. While Lucy is being gang raped, David is trapped in the lavatory of Lucy's homestead, locked away from the act, an act he is powerless to stop. As a result, David develops feelings of remorse, even complicity, as he was not able to save Lucy, confessing to her: "I did nothing. I did not save you" (157). David is humiliated. Marais contends correctly that David's "'imprisonment' means that he is not able to witness Lucy's violation and is thus forced to *imagine* it" (169). Crucially, however, David is *not* able to imagine it. Immediately after the attack, Lucy separates herself from David: when "he tries to take her in his arms", she "wriggles loose" (97). Later, when David tries to sympathize with her, she refuses his gesture: "*You don't know what happened* […] you don't begin to know" (134). Even Bev Shaw supports Lucy when David argues that he "was

there" with her during the attack: "But you weren't there David. She told me. You weren't" (140). David, a rapist, cannot know Lucy's story, cannot know what it feels like to be a rape victim, he is powerless to imagine himself in Lucy's position.

David's humiliation, therefore, centers not only on his inability to save Lucy from being raped but also on his inability to articulate her experience through his discourse. His inability to relate to her experience and her life intensifies later in the novel when she decides not only to keep the unborn child but also marry Petrus, becoming his third wife and concubine, and turning over her land to him, becoming a tenant on his land. Where once David could use his discourse to rationalize any situation, even rape, this act and its consequences leave him bereft of language, without a voice. It is Lucy who tells David how to survive in the new South Africa. For Lucy, one must forget the past, erase one's memory, a concept David finds humiliating: "How humiliating, Such high hopes, and to end like this" (205). To which Lucy concurs, adding, "Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity" (205). In this state of humiliation or disgrace, David learns what it means to be humble, to live with nothing, to live as simply as possible, as just a physical body. Confronted with a new, post-apartheid South Africa, with the loss of order, the distinction between "major" and "minor", the emergence of an ethics of silence in response to rape, the reimagining of land and economic distribution, the uncertain possibility of reconciliation, David realizes that the most appropriate response to "dark times" is, as Tom Herron puts it, to become "imperceptible" (473), to live without "things" (205), to live "like a dog" (205), with humility. Humbled by the loss of his possessions, his voice, and his

sense of his country, Lurie comes to realize that in order to survive in the new South Africa, he has to come to terms with a new reality that leaves him humiliated.

David is reduced past shame, past knowing, past language, even past what he thought it meant to be human. In this way, David experiences abjection. According to Julia Kristeva, language, or the "symbolic", keeps the abject at bay: "The non-distinctiveness of inside and outside […is] unnamable, a border passable in both directions by pleasure and pain. Naming the latter, hence differentiating them, amounts to introducing language, which, just as it distinguishes pleasure from pain as it does all other oppositions, founds the separation inside/outside" (61-62). Reduced to a stage preceding binary opposition and distinct categories, before language and naming, he is reduced to an object: he is made aware of his body. In this way, David begins to comprehend "the difficulty of talking about the body in pain" (Wenzel 64). As such, David begins to sympathize with Lucy's violation not by being forced to *imagine* it, but through abjection or humiliation, through a violence to the self.

This experience of abjection or humiliation is therapeutic for David in that it allows him to both distances himself from an inadequate and problematic language and colonial system, and slough off the Enlightenment-based values of the autonomy of the human subject that characterize the Empire. In this way, David's ego can be understood as subverted or undermined. As such, it must start anew, from a limited perspective, from a poverty of language. In this way, David must return, much like the new South Africa, to the basics. For Alyda Faber, "English has been corrupted by the master-slave relations that dominated apartheid, so that words must return to the basic alphabet" (312). Lurie notices this in his erratic conversation with Petrus: "Nothing short of starting over again with the

ABC. By the time the big words come back reconstructed, purified, fit to be trusted once more, he will be long dead" (129). David, thus, like the Masgistrate, experiences a Lacanian form of therapy. His ego, which for Lacan is a site of *méconnaissance*, misrecognition\, is subverted. But, if we understand David as subverting his ego and reason, then, what replaces it? That is, if David does open up an autonomous position for himself in the symbolic order, how does this position look? How does one *live* with a subverted ego?

David's new *modus vivendi*, mode or way of living, is revealed through his openness to the world and others. Where David once obsessively attempted to fit the changed environment, new attitude, and new way of doing things of the new South Africa into an increasingly irrelevant discourse founded on a Western tradition, his "therapy of humiliation" has opened his self-absorbed mind to an otherness that exceeds the mode of knowing and style of reasoning characteristic of this tradition. Michalinos Zembylas supports such a reading when he writes that "[t]he modus vivendi found by […David] constitutes a graceful position that abandons the historical categorizations that are inherited. In a sense, the novel takes an antihistoricist position, that is, it rejects attempts to obtain mastery over the past by translating it into a recognizable form […David remains] inconsolable before history." (228). David finally asserts his distance from an inadequate and problematic language and colonial system, by relating to the world, with others with an *openness*, which serves as the foundation of his new ethical position that is evident in his relation to animals and humanity, the manner in which he desires, and his art.

David's development towards this *openness* is most fully revealed through his evolving relationship with animals, in that, he becomes no longer oblivious to others. At the beginning of the novel, Lurie sided with the ancients in their belief that, unlike humans,

animals "don't have proper souls" (78). For him, they were a nuisance, as they kept him awake at night with there barking . However, his fixed temperament and fixed mind – "Follow your temperament. It is not a philosophy […] it is a rule" – soon open up to the existence and importance of animal life (2). His affection is first gained by Katy, an abandoned bulldog with whom, as Attridge puts it, "he senses an obscure empathy" (107). Without warning, his feelings overtake him, and in "a moment that combines absurdity and pathos", he falls asleep in Katy's cage, stretched out beside her (Attridge 107). This bonding with animals continues with two Persian sheep that are to be slaughtered for a party that Petrus is throwing. David contemplates the lack of agency and emptiness of their lives: "Sheep do not own themselves, do not own their lives. They exist to be used, every last ounce of them, their flesh to be eaten, their bones to be crushed and fed to poultry" (123). Then, later, at the clinic, where he helps Bev Shaw to euthanize dogs, he has a difficult time getting used to the job: after noticing that the workers beat the bodies of the dead dogs with shovels to break their limbs so they can fit on the furnace conveyer belt, he begins to drive the dead bodies to incinerator and place them on the trolley himself. Admitting that his deed is good for nothing, he says he does it "for his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing" (146).

This development can best be described as identification with animals. This identification seems to arise out of thin air, as David, in reference to the two Persian sheep, is surprised by it: "A bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians, he does not know how. The bond is not one of affection, It is not even a bond with these two in particular, whom he could not pick out from a mob in a field. Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him" (108).

David at one time equated "animal-welfare people" with "Christians of a certain kind": Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat" (73). Now, however, in identifying and sympathizing with animals, David displays an ethics of openness, a humility of bodily reduction. David gives up his romanticized ego: people are no long "major" or "minor" for him, as he has fused the canine and human realms, and in this way demonstrated a concern and openness to "otherness" through animals. Identifying with animals allows David to slough off an Enlightenment-based autonomy of the human subject and a discourse founded on an outdated Western, Romantic tradition, in favor of an awareness of the outside world and others outside of himself, an ethos that he now finally, at the end of the novel, "no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love" (219).

This mode of living with others and openness, and burgeoning notion of *love* connect David to Antigone from Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*. Specifically, David, like Antigone, sheds light on the notion of the "beautiful". For Lacan, the beautiful implies a change of perspective. An object, Lacan proposes, appears beautiful when it embodies the transition point where meaning begins to break down, at the boundary between sense and nonsense, the personal and impersonal. Lacan's reading of *Antigone*, as such, centers on the beauty of its protagonist, who is beautiful because she absolves herself from everything that binds her to the world. Most exemplary, according to Phillipe Van Haute, is when Antigone says, "My brother is what he is", because her statement can also mean, "I am only his sister, I am only a sister" (102). In this way, she is purified from every attachment, besides being "a sister". Antigone's desire, as such, for Lacan, is an absolutely "pure" desire. Such an unbinding from the world occurs at the end of *Disgrace*, when David sees Lucy working on the farm; David

thinks to himself: "What will it entail, being a grandfather? He lacks the virtues of the old: equanimity, kindliness, patience. But perhaps those virtues will come as other virtues go: the virtue of patience for instance. He must look again at Victor Hugo, poet of grandfatherhood. There may be things to learn" (217-218). Here, David has absolved himself of all other ties in the world – from his relationship with prostitutes to his occupation in academia – so as to be only a grandfather to Lucy's unborn child. It is no surprise, then, that David returns to his daughter as a "visitor", arriving on "new footing, a new start" (218). This new footing and new start mark a change in David, as he ponders what it means to be a grandfather, a new position for him, admitting that he may have things to learn. Here, we see David's response to Lucy's resolution to be a "good person" in "dark times", as he has changed from living in a state of *disgrace* to living in a state of *beauty*.

David new mode of living is also revealed through the psychoanalytic notions of sublimation and desire. For Lacan, like Freud, sublimation is the transformation of the sexual drive through the creation of a work of art, so that the sexual drive is employed in a "socially acceptable manner". Whereas David once descried himself as a *servant* of Eros, he now sublimates this once seemingly uncontrollable sex drive through art, specifically his chamber opera about Byron. Crucially, attention to the opera not only takes up more of the narrative at the end of the novel as David acceptably sublimates his desire, but the attention of the opera changes. No longer centered on Byron's relationships with young women, including Teresa Guiccioli, it now concerns Teresa in middle age, after Byron has died. On the one hand, this shift in David's opera reflects a shift in his moral outlook, as he has gone from identifying with the romantic figure to identifying with Teresa, underlining that now he can "find it in his heart to love this plain ordinary woman" (182). On the other hand, this

shift reflects a shift in his language, as he has gone from relying on a failed and archaic Romatnic tradition, which he employed to legitimize his abuse of Melanie, to a voice that displays *love* towards others, including dogs and the "now middle-aged" Teresa, that he was once closed off from. This shift in David's opera, thereby, reflects nothing more than a complete shift in his agency, having learned a new kind of agency reflected in the sublimation of his desire to which he was once simply a passive an agent.

"Yes, I am giving him up", says David Lurie in the final scene of J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. While David is referring to the dog he has come to love, the dog that like him likes music, he speaks in this final affirming line about much more. Having given up prostitutes and Romanticism, and thereby an old way of living and thinking, he has given up the impediments to a life *with* others, *for* others. In this final scene of death, David articulates an ethos of solidarity. In giving up his past, David shows the way forward for a nation still wounded from the traumas of apartheid, an old, violent colonial order. In this final scene, David has become "a dog-man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopump; a *harijan*" (146). He has forsaken "major" for "minor", whether it be caste or species. By coming to live a life based on humility, David demonstrates how we can desire responsibly and live with "beauty", with sympathy, with love, as a collective, both human and animal.

CONCLUSION

From Humiliation to Humility

The worlds that J.M. Coetzee paints in his novels are, above all, bleak. These environments punish its inhabitants, stripping them of their possessions, pride and agency until they are left with the bare minimum, undergoing a stripping away of their *being* that leaves them humiliated and humbled. From the nameless, placeless Empire in *Waiting for the Barbarians* to late-apartheid South Africa in *Life & Times of Michal K* to post-apartheid South Africa in *Disgrace*, Coetzee's vision of civilization is unwelcoming. But Coetzee, as with his influences Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, does not ignore these worlds, *his* worlds that torture and debase and control. Coetzee, instead, critiques the unfair and violent systems that undergird these societies. Whether corrupt government, dictatorship, colonialism, apartheid or decolonization, these systems centre on acts of state violence that Coetzee posits will reappear in the after, the post with the demise of apartheid, as new communities may simply erect themselves on the charred bones of the past. In this way, Coetzee's critiques do not simply look backwards with a reproachful eye but forward as well to the *possibility* of new modes of living, new forms of community.

At the heart of this possibility is the Coetzean character. Alienated and alone, an outsider, Coetzee's characters often feel estranged from the mode of living and ways of reasoning endemic to Empire. In this very estrangement and alienation is birthed the possibility of opposing or living anew in Empire. However, these characters must deal with the violent means of control employed by Empire though its agents of interrogation and

institutions of power on its subjects, namely torture. This torture and humiliation often leaves its victims feeling on the brink, at the limits, as they run up against the limitations of the body, subjectivity, history and life itself. The Magistrate, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, articulates this position of being, even desiring to be, on the brink of nothingness, of impending death: "These dreamless spells are like death to me, or enchantment, blank outside time" (33). How these characters deal with this longing to be outside time and history, for a new subjectivity, for death becomes the *raison d'etre* of Coetzee's novels. That is, as Coetzee once put it, do they "go on playing one's part", or come to "a new awareness" (*Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* 15)?

Many critics read the bleakness of Coetzee's world as overwhelming for his characters. In his recent work *The Politics of Humiliation in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee*, Hania A.M. Nasheef, reads, much like me, Coetzee's novels through the paradigm of humiliation. According to Nasheef, this humiliation is not productive for the characters, as "life generally ends in degrading ways" (177). For him, "[t]here is no chance of exit. The awareness that one cannot step down at one's own will does not bring the Coetzean figures any form of comic relief, but further enslavement and shame" (178). Along these same lines, Vilashini Cooppan argues, in her work *Worlds Within: National Narratives and Global Connections in Postcolonial Writing*, that Coetzee shows how in the postcolonial nation "liberation is still an unfinished project and loss remains the nations dominant mode" (xxi). For her, the Coetzean character relates "to history in the style of perpetually failed mourning" (213).

Such readings do account for much of the humiliation and mourning that occur in Coetzee's novels. After all, the state of shame or disgrace, or dealing with death is not productive for most of the characters. The tortures that the clearly innocent fishing people

endure at the hands of Joll and his interrogation experts in *Waiting for the Barbarians* leaves some of them dead and many of them injured, physically and mentally. The humiliation and shame that Melanie faces at the hands of David Lurie in *Disgrace* far from healing causes her to stop her studies and acting, and leave school disgraced. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, the continual poverty and abject living conditions that Anna K must endure throughout her life eventually leads to an early grave.

Still, as I have argued in this thesis, torture, humiliation and abjection can be therapeutic for some characters, namely the protagonists of these novels. Each of these characters begins their narratives in similar positions with respect to Empire. The Magistrate, in his role as functionary of Empire, and David Lurie, through his language that is a product of a past colonial or apartheid system, are complicit with Empire, while Michael K, through his gardening, chooses to ignore Empire, a no less problematic position. Through their complicity and preference not to, these characters become implicated in the bleak world that Coetzee erects around them. Namely, they become implicated in a mind-set reminiscent of the "Enlightenment", which began in Europe in the 17th-century, and from which colonialism partly manifested. For these characters, it is only through humiliation that they are able to slough off such an Enlightenment-based mind-set and free themselves from complicity and implication in colonialism, apartheid and Empire.

To be humiliated is to be shamed and humbled by agents external to oneself, by external forces larger than the individual, namely, at least in Coetzee's novels, the political agents and institutions of Empire. While humiliation may arise from a number of factors in Coetzee's works, from aging to physical disability to relationship woes, in this thesis, I have focused on language – particularly, the humiliation of losing one's language. The torture that

the Magistrate endures, David Lurie's failed desire to understand and relate to his daughter's rape, and Michael K's inability to express himself, all share a poverty of language, but for these characters this humiliation of silence therapeutically allows for the possibility of something new to take its place. The sloughing off of Enlightenment values necessitates the sloughing off of one's entire symbolic system until one is left alone with simply the body. For each of these characters, living in their body without the cover of language necessitates a newfound ethics of humility. In this way, Coetzee asserts the importance of the physical, the humility of one's own body, but also crucially the humility of the other's body, such as when the Magistrate compares his relationships with the many prostitutes he has known to that with the barbarian girl: "'I embrace her, bury myself in her, lose myself in her soft bird-like flurries. The body of the other one, closed, ponderous, sleeping on my bed in a faraway room, seems beyond comprehension. Occupied in these suave pleasures, I cannot imagine what ever drew me to that alien body" (45). In his contemplation of this tortured girl's body we see the articulation of *care*, a responsibility that each of these characters comes to feel only after their episodes of humiliation, their loss of language, their return to the humility of the body – that site of pain and pleasure we all share. Thus, far from ending in a degrading manner or being caught in a perpetual mourning or melancholia, these characters end their lives anew, with the promise of an adjusted moral compass, and a newfound ethics that centers on humility. Through this novel morality and ethical position comes the hope for care directed towards the impoverished, the disgraced, the barbarian, the other, a hope that the humiliation that one has endured can save others from this same torture, this same fate to which, Coetzee's teaches us, we are all, if we can learn to act together, not necessarily destined.

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VITA

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